

Zaccheus Makes Amends

by Brad Jersak

LUKE 19

⁵ And when Jesus came to [Jericho], he looked up and said, *“Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house.”*
⁶ And he hurried and came down, and received Him, rejoicing.
⁷ When the people saw this, they all began to complain, saying, *“He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner!”*
⁸ But Zaccheus stopped and said to the Lord, *“Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I am giving to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone, I am giving back four times as much.”*
⁹ And Jesus said to him, *“Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham.”*
¹⁰ *For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”*

TRANSFORMING GRACE

Zaccheus' story provides an excellent demonstration of how grace transforms the heart and life of a lost and alienated human being. Christ and this tax collector engage in a mutual act of hospitality anticipating Revelation 3:20.

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. When anyone who hears my voice opens the door, I will enter and have supper with them, and they with me.”

So it was for Zaccheus. God's grace filled his deepest longing and out of Zaccheus' newfound sense of belonging, he was “saved”—from alienation to communion. Christ in his home, Christ in his heart—the living connection that changes us.

In Zaccheus' case, the natural overflow of his encounter with Jesus resulted in a tangible response. He became a willing

participant in his freedom and salvation, prompted by the Spirit to make amends.

In the addictions recovery community, “making amends” refers to personally apologizing to those harmed by our behavior or our treatment of them.

Zaccheus had done great harm in his community. His complicity with Rome as a collections agent for the empire was a great betrayal of his own people.

In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman wrote that tax collectors *“became the grasping hand of Roman authority, filching from Israel the taxes which helped to keep alive the oppression of the gentile ruler. They were Israelites who understood the psychology of the people, and therefore were always able to function with the kind of spiritual ruthlessness that would have been impossible for those who did not know the people intimately. They were despised; they*

were outcasts, because from the inside they had unlocked the door to the enemy. . .

The tax gatherer had no soul; he had long since lost it. When Jesus became a friend to the tax collectors and secured one as his intimate companion, it was a spiritual triumph of such staggering proportions that after nineteen hundred years it defies rational explanation.”

As alarming as Jesus' overture of friendship was to his disciples, his opponents, and to Zaccheus' victims, no one was as staggered as the taxman himself.

As Paul would say, *“The kindness of God leads to repentance”* defined not as self-loathing or as a mere change of mind, but a total reorientation of one's life—*conversion* from self-centeredness to the real-life expression of other-centered love.

This is where Zaccheus' amends (and ours) come in. Zaccheus' amends were substantial. He lays his intentions out before Jesus:

- *First, Zaccheus assesses his wealth in relation to the poverty he was complicit in creating. He makes amends to his community, giving half his possessions to the poor.*

This reminds me of a friend who made a habit of stealing from a center where she volunteered in order to pilfer money for her addiction. Years later, she needed to make amends, not because *they* needed her money, but in order to participate in her grace-transformation. She first apologized to someone in authority, then they worked out a plan for her to make restitution, whether by service or repayment.

- *Second, with what remained of his wealth, Zaccheus identified specific people who he had extorted.*

He did not simply say, “Sorry, folks. I really messed up. But I’ve cleared it up with Jesus and I’m forgiven now. So, we’re all good now, right?” Rather, he actually calculated how much he had squeezed from them, repaid them, and added 400% interest. Why so much?

I can think of two reasons.

- For one, Zaccheus saw that the harm he caused exceeded the cash he’d taken. The cost of his sin to those he’d robbed had compounded. What had they lost in time, potential income, additional hardships, and emotional impact? *Effective reparations take into account the toll to the whole person and their family.*

caused to the “how much more” grace he had received from Jesus. The 400% was measured by the superabundant mercies we experienced.

PRINCIPLES FOR AMENDS

- **Amends demonstrate that we own what we have done.** No blaming. No sidestepping. Yes, there are reasons for our misdeeds, but when shared in amends, they come across as excuses and justifications.

Zaccheus names his sin: *extortion.* NOT “I was just doing my job” or “The Romans made me do it.” Instead, “I did this. I did it to you. That was wrong.”

impacted their financial stability. But he may still need to hear how his actions also humiliated them, brought hardship to their family, and introduced fear and hatred into their hearts.

- **Amends are NOT about extracting forgiveness from the other so we can feel better.**

Those we hurt may be years away from the healing they need to release us, if ever. Those we harm have experienced broken trust that may or may not ever be restored. Our amends need to be a *unilateral* expression of sorrow for the harm we caused, *not contingent on any response*, including forgiveness or reconciliation. We may hope for that, but must not use our amends with those expectations. Otherwise, we’re still guilty of manipulating or minimizing.

LIVING AMENDS

- **Finally, amends are lived, not merely spoken.**

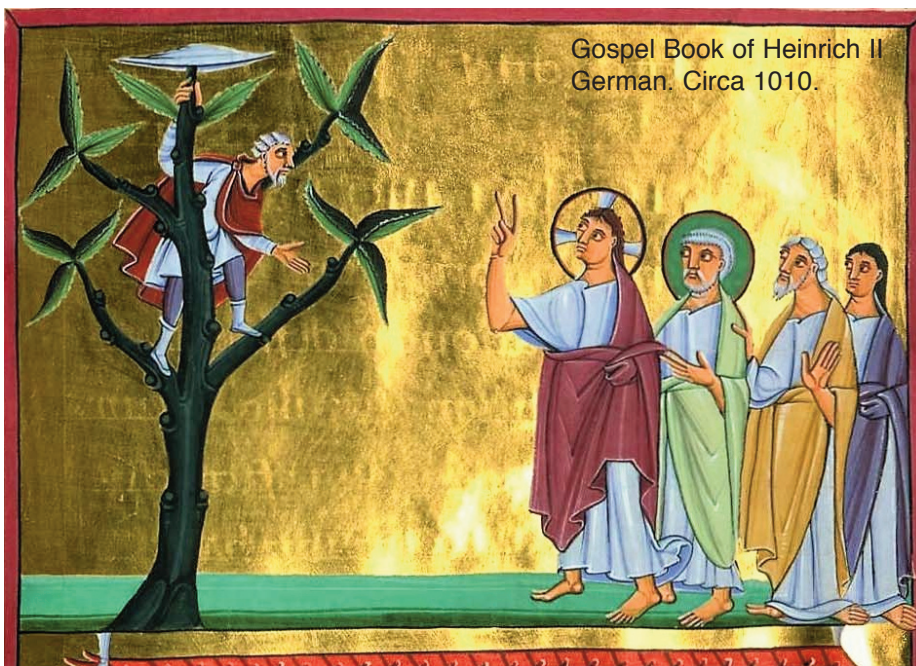
Sometimes “sorry” doesn’t help much. Even a payment can feel like payoff. Or maybe you’ve fallen a thousand times and spoken apologies lack credibility.

No matter. As Zaccheus continues to be faithful, his sincerity will prove itself.

So beyond specific word, *acts of restitution, repentance and amends are a new way to live every day*, empowered by grace as a grateful response to God’s mercy.

Zaccheus’ amends were a real demonstration of the inner change that was occurring—of the new man he was becoming. His story challenges us to yield to the transforming impact of the gospel, courageously and joyfully making and living our amends. □

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Rarely do we see that outside of civil lawsuits, but Zaccheus did so without being sued. Why?

- This speaks to a second reason for his generosity. The law may demand proportional amends: eye-for-an-eye, dollar-for-a dollar. But *grace motivates us to pay forward the generosity we’ve received.* So Zaccheus’ calculous went beyond the harm he had

- **Amends are strictly about cleaning up my side of the street, even if those we wronged have also wronged us.**

Amends demonstrate that we recognize the harm we have caused. It should also include listening to those we’ve harmed to hear what they experienced.

Zaccheus may have known that he extorted someone and